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The Letters Editor,
 The Irish Times,
 Dublin.

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Dear Sir,

Reading the letter of the Indonesian Information Attaché, Mrs Hendrati Munthe (9th April), in reply to David Shanks's excellent article on East Timor (23rd March), one is struck by a sense of unreality. Nowhere does she address the key issue of self-determination. This lies at the heart of the East Timor problem, as the judges of the International Court of Justice in The Hague made clear in June last year in the case brought by Portugal against Australia over the Timor Gap Treaty. In their final judgement, they took the opportunity to refer twice to the former Portuguese colony as a 'non self-governing territory whose people have yet to exercise their right to self-determination', thus rejecting the validity in international law of the Indonesian 'act of integration' of East Timor as its 27th province in July 1976.

When it serves its interests, Indonesia seems to have no problem accepting the mediation of the UN and the judgements of international lawyers. Since 1945, for example, it has sought UN support for its independence struggle against the Dutch (1945-9) and its claim to West Papua (post-1973, Irian Jaya), which was eventually transferred to Jakarta under UN auspices in 1962-3 after the Dutch withdrawal. More recently, it obtained recognition in international law for its 'archipelagic concept' (wawasan nusantara) which gave it the right to link the outer extremities of its island chain in a 200-mile zone of territorial waters. It even accepts the important role of international human rights agencies such as Amnesty International: in February 1992, the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Ali Alatas, publicly regretted the fact they had not been around in 1946 to chronicle Dutch massacres in South Sulawesi (Celebes). Yet, when it comes to allowing Amnesty access to present-day Indonesia, it is a different story.

By trying to have it both ways - accepting international norms when suits them, and riding roughshod over them when it does not - Indonesia has placed itself alongside 'terror' states as Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Qaddafi's Libya. Indeed, the precedent of Jakarta's 1976 annexation of East Timor was specifically referred to by Saddam in August 1990 when, after invading Kuwait, he asked why, if Indonesia could make East Timor its 27th province, he could not make the emirate his 19th province?

Until an internationally-recognised act of self-determination has taken place in East Timor, the only way Indonesia can lay claim to the territory is by force. Such a claim is not only invalid in international law, it is also highly insecure as the continued presence of 17,000 Indonesian troops and para-military police - Jakarta's black and tans - in the Ulster-sized territory constantly reminds us.

Dr Peter Carey,
 Fellow and Tutor in Modern History.

Peter Carey